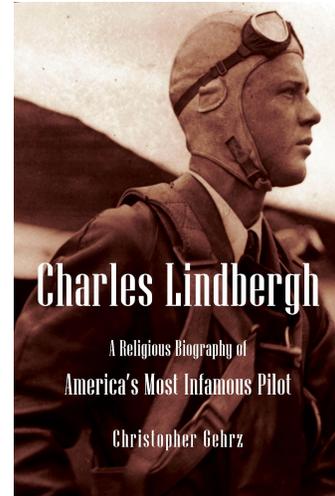


# Charles Lindbergh: A Religious Biography of America's Most Infamous Pilot

By Christopher Gehrz

*A Guide for Group Discussion  
and Individual Reflection*



When Eerdmans first published my “spiritual but not religious” biography of Charles Lindbergh in August 2021, we didn’t include a set of discussion questions, but I think that this document can serve as a helpful supplement to the book itself. My thanks to Rev. Gary Anderson and the rest of the Faith Explorers group at Incarnation Lutheran Church in Shoreview, Minnesota — for inspiring this guide and taking it out for a test drive!

Whether by guiding conversations within groups like Gary’s or enriching the experience of individual readers, the guide is mostly meant to enhance comprehension of Lindbergh’s spiritual story, helping to bring into focus key themes, ideas, individuals, and events. But with most chapters, I’ve also tried to include at least one question that’s meant to prompt personal reflection or application. For if Barbara Tuchman was right that the past is often a “distant mirror” in which we notice a resemblance to our present, then perhaps we can see a bit of ourselves reflected in the story of Lindbergh.

- Chris Gehrz, January 2022

## **Before You Start Reading...**

...consider a couple of initial questions:

1. In general, do you enjoy reading biographies, and why? In particular, what are you hoping to get out of this biography?
2. Have you read a religious or spiritual biography before? How does that approach tend to differ from other ways of writing about individual lives?

## **Introduction**

1. Early in his career, Charles A. Lindbergh was called a “famous unknown.” All these decades after he burst onto the scene, how well do you think you know Lindbergh? What aspects of his life are most and least familiar to you?
2. Chris describes both Charles and Anne Lindbergh as 20th century examples of a phenomenon that’s become more and more common in the 21st century: Americans who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation (hence: “nones”) or as “spiritual, but not religious.” Do you know anyone who fits that description? (Or do you yourself?) How do “the nones” approach spirituality differently than the more traditionally religious?

### *Chapter 1*

#### **Ancestors**

1. If someone were to write a biography of you, would you expect that writer to start with a chapter on your ancestors? Do you think that the lives and beliefs of your parents, grandparents, and other predecessors can help illuminate your own life and beliefs?
2. What stands out to you about the upbringing of Lindbergh’s mother and father? Can you already see any glimpses of their son in the stories of Evangeline and C.A. Lindbergh?

### *Chapter 2*

#### **A Boyhood on (and beyond) the Upper Mississippi**

1. “From its start,” Chris concludes on p. 25, “Charles Lindbergh’s spiritual journey led him away from religion, whose certainties squelched curiosity, whose community stifled individualism.” What did Lindbergh find so off-putting about his early experience of Christianity? Does his recollection about that aspect of his childhood resonate with your own, or did you have a more positive early experience of religion?
2. Chris then analyzes the contents of the books shelved in the drawing room of the Lindbergh House in Little Falls, Minnesota. How might a future historian or biographer interpret the contents of your library (or Kindle)?
3. Why did young Charles Lindbergh find science so much more appealing than religion (or politics)? How do you tend to think about the relationship between scientific inquiry and religious faith?

*Chapter 3*  
**“The Winged Gospel”**

1. What words come to mind when you think about airplanes? Did it surprise you to learn that aviation carried religious connotations for so many people in the early 20th century?
2. If not airplanes, do you think that any present-day technological innovation inspires anything like a religious response? In other words: is there a 21st century equivalent to the 20th century “winged gospel”?
3. On p. 52, Chris pauses to acknowledge that one challenge facing any Lindbergh biographer is that the pilot “recorded almost nothing about what he thought, felt, and believed” until later in life. (Even his recollections of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood were written much later.) Given this limitation, how much do you think we can really know about Lindbergh’s early spiritual development?

*Chapter 4*  
**“The New Christ”**

1. After Charles Lindbergh flew solo across the Atlantic Ocean in May 1927, some awestruck observers compared him to an angel, an apostle, a prophet, or even to Jesus Christ himself. Why do you think Lindbergh’s achievement carried such religious — even messianic — connotations at that time in history?
2. The German historian Modris Eksteins claims that Lindbergh “was literally worshipped and adored” (p. 58); American journalist Silas Bent complained that Lindbergh was one of the “demi-gods” of his era’s celebrity culture, alongside professional athletes like Babe Ruth (p. 61). Are there individuals today who inspire that kind of adulation? Are Americans in the 2020s as prone to what Bent called “idol worship” as were people in the 1920s?
3. Eugenics make the first of several appearances in this book on pp. 67-69. Have you encountered eugenics before? Do you think of it as a bygone idea, or do you hear any of its assumptions echoed in contemporary culture?

*Chapter 5*  
**Anne**

1. In this chapter we first meet the two people who did most to influence Charles Lindbergh’s spirituality: his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and his mentor, Alexis Carrel. Early on, do you already see any significant similarities or differences between them? How might they have exerted differing influences on Charles?

2. Anne recalled growing up in the midst of a liberal Protestantism that emphasized rigorous education, the doing of “good works,” and humanity’s “inevitable progress to the millennium.” Is that kind of Christianity familiar or appealing to you?

## *Chapter 6*

### **“A Cruel God of Chance”**

1. This chapter starts with the kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh, Jr. Then or now, why do you think that the Lindbergh kidnapping — what’s still sometimes called “The Crime of the Century” — and the later trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann inspire so much interest?

2. Charles Lindbergh said little about the crime or the trial, either at the time or in later years, as he wrote his memoirs. How should we interpret his silence? Do you think that the death of his son had an important effect on his spiritual journey?

3. The Lindberghs had been figures of enormous public interest since the late 1920s, but press coverage grew so intense after the birth and death of his son that Charles took his family to Europe at the end of 1935. Do you see similar problems with the role of the media and celebrities today? (For that matter, do you think that a biography written decades after the Lindbergh’s deaths is still, in some sense, invading their privacy?)

## *Chapter 7*

### **The Happiest Years**

1. In the middle of their three-year exile in Europe, Charles and Anne Lindbergh attended a world religions congress in India and grew increasingly interested in Buddhism and Hinduism. How familiar are you with Eastern religions? What drew the Lindberghs to those beliefs and practices?

2. During a short visit back to the United States, Charles met Jim Newton, a Christian businessman who would become a lifelong friend — another of what Chris earlier called “the many conversation partners who spoke into Charles Lindbergh’s spiritual development” (p. 4). Who have been the “conversation partners” in your own spiritual development? What has it felt like when you disagree with such friends — as Lindbergh and Newton did when it came to the latter’s connection with Frank Buchman? (see also ch. 12)

3. This chapter is also where we learn more about the idiosyncratic beliefs of Alexis Carrel, and their impact on Charles Lindbergh. What did you think of Carrel’s desire “to fuse empirical, philosophical, and religious ways of knowing into a single ‘science of man’?” Can that project be separated from Carrel’s support for eugenics, or are they interconnected?

*Chapter 8*  
**“The Nazi Theology”**

1. This pivotal chapter begins with Charles Lindbergh’s (unpublished) claim that human equality is a “false god.” What explains his antipathy to equality? If you disagree with him... what has shaped your beliefs about equality?
2. About halfway through this biography, Chris observes that “the more spiritual (but not religious) he became, the more deeply Charles Lindbergh embraced the racialized worldview of eugenics” (p. 113). Is that a coincidence, or do you think that Lindbergh’s spiritual journey itself deepened his racial views?
3. Given how he is presented in this chapter, would you join Charles Lindbergh’s critics in calling him a “Nazi sympathizer” — or even, in Harold Nicolson’s words, a believer in “the Nazi theology” (p. 117)? (You might want to revisit this question again after reading the next chapter...)

*Chapter 9*  
**America First**

1. This chapter primarily tells the story of Charles Lindbergh’s advocacy for the America First Committee, a politically and ideologically diverse group of prominent Americans opposed to their country’s participation in the Second World War. (Not always for the same reasons that Lindbergh cited.) If you had been alive in 1939-1941, do you think you would have supported earlier American intervention in the war against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy? Why or why not?
2. When she first heard a recording of her father’s infamous speech at Des Moines, Iowa in September 1941, at which he accused Jews of agitating for war, Reeve Lindbergh couldn’t believe her ears: “You never said such things! You raised your children never to say, never even to *think* such things—this must be somebody else talking. It can’t be you!” (p. 138) Is it possible that Charles Lindbergh both held anti-Semitic and racist views and yet also raised his children to embrace religious and racial tolerance?

*Chapter 10*  
**The War**

1. How does Lindbergh’s experience of WWII compare to others that you’ve encountered (e.g., in your family history, or in movies, books, or museum exhibits about the war)?

2. It seems that this is the point in his life when Charles Lindbergh first paid serious attention to Christianity — or, at least, to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. What do you think explains the timing of his newfound interest in the religion that bored him as a child?

3. How do you think Lindbergh's experience of combat in the South Pacific and his postwar tour of defeated Germany challenged or confirmed his beliefs? What do you make of his response to the Holocaust, inspired by a tour of the slave labor camp at Dora-Mittelbau (pp. 160-61)?

## Chapter 11

### Beyond Flight

1. In his 1948 book, *Of Flight and Life*, Charles Lindbergh offered his first public reflections on the importance of religion — even as he walked back some of his earlier enthusiasm for science and technology. Do you agree with him that “science untempered by religion” is a threat to human civilization (p. 167)?

2. Five years later, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir of his 1927 flight to Paris, Lindbergh recalled realizing that “It’s hard to be an agnostic up here in the *Spirit of St. Louis*”... even he came to suspect that God may surpass human understanding, having “no shape, no tangibility at all” (p. 178). To your mind, what are the strongest arguments for or against the existence of God? If you do believe in God, to what extent do you think humans can understand the divine?

3. At about the same time, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote her best-loved book, *Gift from the Sea*, a reflection on seeking “to live ‘in grace’ as much of the time as possible” — with grace defined not theologically, but as a sort of “inner harmony, essentially spiritual, which can be translated into outward harmony” (p. 175). Do you find yourself yearning “to live in grace” in this sense? Is religion an aid to this goal, or do you tend to find “grace” from other sources?

## Chapter 12

### Last Years

1. Covering the last fifteen years of Lindbergh's life, this chapter begins with a shocking secret that first came to light just twenty years ago. Had you heard this story before? (Do you wish Chris had lingered longer on its details?) What effect does this still-recent revelation have on your view of Lindbergh?

2. As he started work on the autobiography that would eventually be published after his death, Lindbergh drew a sharp difference between admiration for Jesus Christ and rejection of the religion that bears his name. (Do you see a similar tension between Jesus and Christianity?) In the end, who or what was Jesus to Charles Lindbergh?

3. In the 1960s Lindbergh pursued a newfound interest in environmental conservation — at the same time that he admired the pantheism of peoples like the Maasai. Do you agree with Lindbergh that “Man and his environment are one. Where his environment deteriorates, he himself deteriorates” (p. 195)? Do you also see a spiritual dimension to environmental protection?

### *Chapter 13*

#### **Of Death and Afterlife**

1. Told by doctors that he didn't have long to live, Charles Lindbergh flew to his home in Hawaii in August 1974 and spent his last days designing his own grave and funeral. How did the resulting site and service encapsulate Lindbergh's “spiritual but not religious” identity?

2. Have you given any thought to the manner of your burial? What epitaph would you choose for your grave? What elements would you want included in your memorial service?

3. Chris notes that historians and biographers have “offered a mixed assessment of [Charles Lindbergh]. The most critical among them can't dispute the enduring significance of Lindbergh's flight to Paris or his later work as a conservationist; the most admiring can't avoid the ugliness of his racial views or his shortcomings as a husband and father” (p. 202). As you near the end of this book, do you tend to be more admiring or critical of Lindbergh? (Has reading Chris's version of the Lindbergh story shifted your view in either direction, or solidified a view you already held?)

#### **Afterword**

1. Chris sets the writing of this book against the backdrop of two police-involved killings of black Minnesotans: Philando Castile and George Floyd. Does learning that context affect how you think about this Lindbergh biography and its themes?

2. Do you think that Charles Lindbergh would have held the same racial views had he adhered to a more traditional form of organized religion instead of pursuing his eclectic spirituality in a largely solitary, idiosyncratic fashion?